

SUMNER V. GEORGE: WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THEM?

The 19th century is coming to a close and the United States of America has left the destruction of the Civil War and is entering a new upheaval- the Second Industrial Revolution. For as long as people could remember, Americans owned their own businesses and worked on farms in the country side, but the Second Industrial Revolution brought about the rise of factory production and with it- a fundamental shift in how Americans worked and interacted with the economy. This shift forever changed American economics and politics and created new issues and questions for Americans to answer surrounding how the government should interact with this new way of American life. Even today, these same questions and issues swirl in the public's mind. In order to more fully understand the questions Americans face today, it would be wise to thoroughly understand the time period that saw these changes and how those living in them reacted to them. I will discuss two documents providing contrary views that Americans held at the time of this transition.

The Second Industrial Revolution brought about great change: More and more Americans were working in factories while private farms were become less and less of an option. Fewer and fewer Americans were maintaining their labor independence, and a great number of Americans were becoming wage workers in factories. As time passed, those who owned the factories and paid wages ("capital") became more at odds with those who worked in the factories ("labor"). Laborers wanted to maintain their understanding of freedom and what it represented: work independent from direct oversight. Capital also wanted to maintain its understanding of freedom: private property rights. For capital to maximize profits, capital believed it could not pay or treat laborers well which infuriated many factory workers. This reshaping of the economy brought about a fundamental shift in how Americans viewed work, labor, and wealth. To the liking of

capital: the new economy did allow some individuals to accrue massive incomes and estates, but it also brought with it periods of intense economic instability, often times resulting in economic depressions and recessions. These depressions only added to the frustration and anger of laborers. (Foner, pg. 592-602)

Right around this time, many social thinkers were proposing solutions or analyses of the current trend in American life. One such thinker- William Graham Sumner- wrote an essay regarding his supportive view of Social Darwinism. He essentially claims that wealth is naturally distributed to the fittest members of society and any attempt to redistribute or help those other individuals who fail to accrue wealth is simply to scoff in the face of the natural order of things. On the contrary, Henry George (another social thinker) concurrently wrote an essay claiming that poverty is more akin to individuals stealing for themselves what nature offers to all and that this itself is neither justice, nor liberty. These arguments bear a striking similarity to the arguments you might hear in a modern political discourse. Sumner and George do differ in their claims, but the arguments they make can provide some understanding of the ideas surrounding these issues when they first came into being.

First, let us look at Sumner's views on Social Darwinism that are believed to have been penned sometime in the 1880's. The views he presents in his essay (and that George presents in his) are not uncommon and in fact represent a significant portion of the American population around this time. Sumner claims that men are born with the requirement to grapple with nature in order to attain what they need to survive and to defend themselves from that which means to do them harm. Sumner speaks to the fundamental economic concept of scarcity: the reality that there isn't enough of anything. Sumner makes this clear when he says: "there are trees which may be used for fuel or dwellings, but labor is required to fit them for use" (Sumner, 32). He

speaks to how all natural resources are divided amongst the people of a land, and when those resources are plentiful, the number of people in that area will grow. When the population grows, poverty will always reappear. Ultimately, he argues, poverty is inherent in the social structure of humanity and that the worst of the race will inherently fail. “Competition, therefore, is a law of nature.... If we do not like it.... We can take from the better and give to the worse.... We shall favor the survival of the unfittest, and we shall accomplish this by destroying liberty” (Sumner, 35). Sumner believes that any action which lessens inequalities goes against the laws of nature and works against liberty. (Sumner)

These views, taken to their extremes (as they were in the early twentieth century) can become quite dangerous. Sumner himself ultimately believes in allowing for the weakest of mankind to be weeded out in order for mankind to progress to its next stage. There is a period of time (resulting from this line of thinking) that contained the American Eugenics movement which came to an abrupt halt in response to World War II.

Interestingly, Sumner’s beliefs are notably similar to many beliefs that may be heard in modern political discourse. The Republican Party has long criticized what they call: “handouts” or “redistribution of wealth.” Many cite the same reasons as Sumner. They claim (in less overt terms than Sumner) that if we allow working class people to get handouts from the government, they will become lazy and have less reason to work.

On the other side of the coin, many of this time period did not agree with Sumner just as many people today do not stand with the Republican Party. In fact, many individuals may agree more with “Progress and Poverty,” written by Henry George in 1879. Henry George was a social thinker who was particularly invested in the growing problem of income inequality in this time. As the working class became more frustrated with the state of their lives, Henry George

published “Progress and Poverty” which became a best seller. Many workers resonated with his call for an economy where income was more evenly balanced.

Mr. George argues that a society which fails to equally distribute wealth will throw itself back into a form a barbarism. He further claims that the evils that rise out of this failing are “not imposed by natural laws; but... they spring solely from social mal-adjustments which ignore natural laws.” (George, 39) Fundamentally, George believes (to the contrary of Sumner) that natural laws are those of justice, balance, and equality- not of struggle, survival, or toil. (George)

George appeals directly to the American sense of pride when he argues that Liberty itself (the cornerstone of American ideals) is meaningless and empty when it lacks justice. Justice, he claims, is “the natural law— the law of health and symmetry and strength, of fraternity and cooperation” (George, 40) He even argues that Americans have a core misunderstanding of what liberty is. He argues that Americans view liberty as a fundamentally separate concept from “virtue, wealth, knowledge, invention, national strength, and national independence,” (George, 40) and that this divide itself is an error. He argues that these things are one and the same. That where Liberty grows, so will virtue, wealth, and those same fundamental ideas he mentioned earlier. Clearly, George’s views have much in common with many young voters in today’s America. Bernie Sanders ran a notably successful presidential campaign on rhetoric criticizing income inequality as a fundamental threat to liberty- similar to the language used by George. (George)

Many of the questions discussed in this document have been repeatedly asked for the last century and trace all the way back the Second Industrial Revolution. We, as Americans, can learn a lot about the current state of our nation by looking back. Beyond the understanding these documents provide about the discourse surrounding these arguments, we may also be able to

glean some degree of understanding of what our future may hold based on how previous arguments resolved. Within 50 years of these documents child labor laws, reduced working hours, and a minimum wage were all created to address the concerns of American laborers. While many of these things were accomplished, obviously many of Sumner's views/ideas have significantly impacted American views and understandings of liberty and freedom as well.

American politics have always revolved around several central questions. The question discussed here ultimately is: "what is liberty?" I am not arguing for any side of this issue, but simply arguing that the past is worth a look when talking about our future.

WORKS CITED

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